AUNT PATSY'S NEW GLASSES

By ROSE WILLIS JOHNSON.

"Well, what shall we do about her?" Jabez demanded grimly—Jabez, the younger, who had tried and failed. "It is useless to try to live with her—it can't be done! Milly was patience itself, and the children never opened their mouths before her. She's a reg'lar old cat! I toted her back to the hollow, with meal and what not enough to keep her awhile, and left her to hoot with the owls. But it won't do! The neighbors will cry shame if we leave the widow of our Uncle Jabez to die alone. If they knew her as we do—"

The rest of the sentence was lost in a growl. Sufficiently strong language was forbidden Deacon Watkin, shining light of little Mount Zion.

John, his brother, stood whittling, making a litter on the neat hearth. His daughter, slim and still, was washing dishes at the sink, taking no part in the family council, but ever and anon her bright eyes darted eager glances and her lips trembled with desire. It was in the days when young people waited permission to speak.

John gave a final flirt to the bit of pine stick and shut his knife. "There, wife, I've made a mess for ye—all on account of Jabez' widow. I don't know what we can do. She sha'n't come here again—not by a jugful! But I'll do my part by the old lady. We three boys can afford to keep her, and we can afford to pay a girl to stay there with her. We can get one for six bits a week."

"You'll have to get a new girl every Saturday night," Jabez grunted. "There ain't a girl atop o' earth as is goin' to put up wi' 'er tantrums."

And then Lyonette spoke, paling sensitively: "Let me go, mother! Let me try Aunt Patsy!'

There was astonished silence, and then her father whistled.

"You try your Aunt Patsy, Trotkins! Well, I'll be groomed!"

"No, sir," soberly. "But I've always liked Aunt Patsy, and I'm sorry for her. I believe I can get along with her—alone. And I want the six bits."

She made the admission gravely. She was so exquisitely truthful her motives never clouded themselves, nor took on false colors. Was it silly to long so ardently for the trifles dear to girlhood—ribbons, laces, soft bright garments to adorn her young prettiness? Sometmes she gathered ferns and flowers, twining them in her hair, clasping them to her bosom, her eyes bright and innocent as the eyes of a self-admiring infant. If vanity urged her, surely the sin was not unpardonable.

None of this at home, however. She wore her holland and homespun and was staid and sensible, a little maid for staid, sensible parents to trust and cherish.

It took some time to win a grudging permission to "try her hand," but once given her spirits rose. She was optimistic, perhaps a bit self-confident. But it seemed to her that she should succeed—that the lonely old heart had a hidden key, which it was possible to find. She meant to try.

"Aunt Patsy" was a local figure. For years—for half a century—she had terrorized the community. Although poor and ignorant, her will was absolute and not to be questioned. Children whispered the word witch. She was a cross the Watkin brothers found hard to bear.

Still, they tried to do their duty, for Uuncle Jabez' sake. They paid the tax on her little place, contributed to her support and would have made her one of themselves had her vile temper permitted.

One bright June morning six weeks later a stranger approached the house. He lifted his hat.

"May I see the lady of the house?" he queried.

"Yes—if she'll let you. I'll ask," answered Lyonette the truthful, and her clear young voice rang out insistently: "Aunt Patsy—Aunt Patsy! Do you want to see a man, Aunt Patsy?"

A tall, bent figure appeared in the doorway.

"A man!" she said. "What does he want, Lyonette?"

The "man" spoke for himself:

"I have spectacles here, grandma—won't you look through a pair? I am sure you need something better than the things on your nose—they are nothing but window glass."

Patsy shook her head. "No money," she said. "How should I buy spectacles, who am alone, always alone, and too old to do aught but knit? But I can knit! Ask the whole countryside who makes the best socks!"

"But a knitter—the best knitter in the country—needs glasses. Think of dropped stitches, grandma. Here, it won't cost you anything to have your eyes tested. Let me show you what you are needing."

The old lady submitted, and in a few minutes he had selected a pair and induced her to try them. They were double glasses, "nigh-tos and fur-offs," as she said.

She looked at her hands, her dress, her work; and then going to the door looked out across the valley, fair and peaceful in the sunlight. A long time she stood there entranced. Lyonette never forgot her expression. The weight of years, sorrow and soul-struggle seemed lifted. She grew young before them and Lyonette turned away her face when she saw an unconscious tear form and roll slowly down.

With a long, quivering sigh she took off the spectacles, wiping them and passed them back.

"Thank ye, sir—I thank ye kindly." Her voice was more softly keyed than was its wont. "It rolled away the years. I saw the old home as it looked when Jabez brought me here. I'm nearly blind. Ain't it cur'us I didn't know it before? It was nice—I thank ye for the look. But I won't take no more o' your time. I can't buy—so there's an end o' it!"

"Only five dollars! Surely you can, grandma! Five dollars for the best glasses in the country."

She shook her head. "I can't!" regretfully. "I'm so old it don't matter. One is almost done seein', at 80. G'long, sir—I can't buy."

The optician buttoned his case, still looking at her. Had he looked at Lyonette he would have found a study there.

Profound sympathy had stirred her at first. And then a thought sprang to life, full-grown. The money earned by six weeks' patient work lay snugly tucked in the toe of an old stocking. Four—fifty—she had not spent a cent. Something told her the spectacle man would take that and let Patsy have the glasses. As if in answer to the thought he spoke, adjusting the strap.

"I'm coming back in about two weeks. I have a certain route, over which I go. I am responsible. If my patrons are dissatisfied I'm to be found. You need those glasses badly, grandma, for health's sake—your have headaches, don't you? I thought so. And for the sake of your business and your pleasure, I'd like to make terms with you."

Still Patsy shook her head and still the pitying voice pleaded in the soul of Lyonette. "But she's selfish and cross! She cares for no one but herself!" urged other voices. "She would not spend a cent on me to save my life. And I've put up with so much to earn the money! It will buy me the pretty shoes—shoes like other girls wear—and a pink lawn, light and bright as a cloud. And ribbons—oh, I can't!"

The man tipped his hat and walked away. And Lyonette stood staring blankly at the strip of sunshine where he had stood.

"It's time to put on dinner!" a snappish voice broke her trance. "All you do is to stand and gawk. Why don't you git to work? I like to see young folks move, I do. It's all along of your raisin', though—how could anyone expect ye to amount to anything? Why, your name's enough. Lyonette!" Her contempt escaped in a snort. "I wanted 'em to call ye for me, you bein' the on'y girl in the family. But it must be Lyonette. Well, Lyonette, peel the taters."

Lyonette peeled the taters. She did it very silently. In her heart self triumphed. She was glad—yes, glad she had kept her precious money. It made her tremble thinking of that moment's weakness. Why should she waste anything on the cross old thing who knew nothing but to scold and nag? What had she done to merit this tirade? What if they had called her "Patsy," to please her?

She was something more than ill-humored the rest of the day—she was simply ferocious. Her face kept the peculiar pallor that brooding, sullen anger gives. Once or twice the thought flitted through the mind of Lyonette that that moment's clutch on the joy of renewed vision had plunged her into deeper darkness. She put the thought from her quickly. Patsy was a vixen—what mattered the immediate cause of the outbreak?

The next Saturday the old lady arose, determination in her eye.

"I'm goin' visitin', Lyonette," she announced. "I shall be gone a day or two. You are to stay here and look after things. You've got to mind the little chickens."

"But, aunt!" Lyonette expostulated in dismay, "I'm afraid to stay here at night alone!"

"I've stayed alone, day and night, for many a year," grimly. "The owls and whippoorwills won't hurt ye. You must mind the chickens and not let 'em stray too far for varments to ketch 'em. You may scour the tins today."

The girl said no more. What Patsy willed must be done. But all at once she felt the money for her coveted outfit was being dearly earned. More and more it seemed so during the lonely day and night which followed. Right glad was she early Monday morning to see her kinswoman hobbling home.

The welcoming smile on her lips met no answer—Patsy's were stern and set. So long had she pondered wrong, real or imaginary, habit had made her a slave. All men were viewed as foemen—even Lyonette, the patient!

"I felt I'd oughter come home," she grumbled, putting away her best bonnet and apron. "I calc'lated the chickens would die for want o' water, and the Early Harvests be adrappin', or shook, and the taters et up with bugs. There's no comfort in leavin' home when you know things are ruinatin' Mix me a dibe o' meal, girl, and let me see me fowls. I just know they hain't been seed after as I see after 'm."

Doggedly Lyonette mixed the meal and stood by while Patsy called the brood. "Little, Little, Little!" shrilled her strong, high-keyed voice. There was an answering clamor, as down the hillside rushed her pets.

"One, two, three, four, five," counted the mistress. "Six, seven, eight"—over and over, with limitless patience, she counted the moving mass. The result was displeasing.

"They're not all here," she announced. "I can tell! I knowed in a minute. Oh, I'm hard to fool! Where's the white Rose-comb, and wheer's my ch'ice red English? They're not here. What I want to know, where are they?"

Lyonette shrugged her shoulders imperceptibly. "On their nests, likely," she answered; "I can't say when I noticed them last."

"Can't you!" the dame shrieked in a sudden accession of wrath. "Oh, can't you! So it goes—all rob and abuse me. You'd all murder me if you dared. See how my best fowls are picked out and sold! Yes, sold, Lyonette! I ain't afeared to say what I b'lieve to be gospel!"

Lyonette paled. "Do you mean, aunt," she began slowly.

Patsy snatched the words from her lips. "I mean ye be a set o' thieves and liars—the Watkins tribe! I mean I'm set on and picked over by ye! I'll lock my chickens up next time, and and take the key. Little, Little, Littles—what use are the call? Ye're sold for goodies and things, that's what ye be!"

There was a dazed look on Lyonette's face. She walked half way to the gate, then came back, her eyes blazing.

"I haven't sold your chickens, Mrs. Watkins," she said. "I'm going home. Will you come see I do not pack up anaything belonging to you, with my things?"

"You'll bear watching!" Patsy spoke with nervous venom. She had gone farther than she intended—but what could stop her career? 'Go home!" She shook her fist close to the girl's face. "Go home! Tell your hypocrite father I thank him for nothin'. I don't want ye, nor any o' the name. As I've lived, so kin I die—alone."

That was a week ago. In anger Lyonette went, but the anger was all gone now—sweet pity had taken its place.

"She's half crazy, Lynn," her father said, stroking the liberated curls. "I've come to believe she's never been jes' right since her little baby died—a score o' years ago. It was the only one she ever had, and she worshiped it. She always had a thought Jabe's people wanted the baby from her—I don't know why. She hated Babe's mother; when the little one drapped off she wouldn't have her at the buryin'. She couldn't let a soul touch it, putting it in the coffin, and turnin' the screws herself. She's crazy, Lynn, that's what she is. We hadn't oughter let you gone; if anybody could a succeeded, seems like 'twould a been you, darlin'."

"Half-crazy, and unhappy!" the soft little voice mourned. "Did I do right, daddy, to come home? You know I didn't steal her hens!"

"Like as not ye went out and picked a few diamonds," he retorted. "Yes, I'm glad ye come. Let the old lady jaw the owls awhile. I'll send her some flour next time I go to mill."

He had gone to mill now, and she was alone, thinking pityingly of Patsy. Of her strange, dreary life, of the hard work her knotted fingers had done well, of the little dead baby the fierce mother had loved fiercely. How all light had faded, leaving her in shadow. And then she thought of her as she stood in the cottage door, so eager, so surprised—so sad. "One is almost done seein' at 80," she seemed to hear her say.

Dreamily her glance wandered to the blue, blue sky of June. She was taking mental account of the hundred joys which come to her without voluntary effort. How good was the great Giver—unthanked, misrepresented, denied, but always giving!

She started with a cry as a shadow fell at her feet, and a pleasant voice said: "Good morning! Is there anyone needing spectacles, miss? I am a specialist, will test eyes free of—"

"Yes!" she said hurriedly, a sob in her voice, almost laying hold of the man's sleeve in her eagerness. "I'm so glad you came back! Do you remember the old lady below there, who wanted your glasses so badly and had no money?"

"Yes," quickly. "Yes, I do. Well?"

"I'll buy the five-dollar pair for her. Write me a receipt, then go at once. Will you be sure to give her that pair?"

"I will be very sure." He drew out his note-book. "Your name, please."

She gave the money, counted and gave it to him. "There, go right away—time is precious. She is almost done seeing—don't you remember?"

In the gloaming a drooping figure hobbled up the walk, stopping in front of Lyonette, who was watering her flowers. In the shocked pause they stared helplessly into each other's faces. Aunt Patsy wore the new glasses, and was using the 'nigh-to's.'"

"Of course I knew you didn't take the chickens," she said, and then broke down. "I've got your glasses on, Lyonette—they've cleared my sight. I was nearer blind—than I thought. I've fought with God—Lyonette. I give in to him. I've asked him to forgive me—all the black years—since he took my baby. I've asked him—to give me—you. Come back—for a few days—more. All I have shall—be yours. Come back home—Lyonette."

Her voice died to the merest whisper. The girl drew closer, and strong arms folded the trembling figure to a heart which beat contentedly under its brown homespun covering. There was no regret, but great tenderness, a great peace.